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## **Food access in remote rural places: consumer accounts of food shopping.**

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Food access in remote rural places: consumer accounts of food shopping.

**Abstract:**

In remote rural and island communities access to food involves adaption of living style and travel outside the local area as a normal and integral part of food shopping. Despite the poor retail assortment consumers have a strong allegiance to local food stores centred on a desire to maintain a local retail presence and support the community. Deeper understanding of consumer access to food and adaptations to constrained access has implications for food policy for these remote areas and public policy on remote regions more generally. Results are reported for remote island communities in Scotland.

Keywords: regional food access, food retail, remote communities, consumer choice, consumer welfare, qualitative

## 1. Introduction

Food consumers in remote rural areas, compared to their urban counterparts, are increasingly disadvantaged in their access to a range of products. This long-standing and worsening problem remains unresolved. For the rural consumer food access is constrained by physical distance to shops, increased delivery time, limited choice of product and higher prices in addition to general

economic and social problems linked to fewer employment opportunities and decreasing support for an aging population. In Scotland around one third of the population live in rural communities with some five percent living in remote regions (Cummins et al, 2008; Mackay and Laing, 1982). Research has focused on the challenges facing rural food retailers (Calderwood and Freathy, 2011; Paddison and Calderwood, 2007) but less is known about the experiences of food consumers living in remote, often island, communities (Scarpello et al, 2009; Skerratt, 1999). This paper provides a consumer perspective on access to food retailing in remote island communities. It argues that only by understanding the consumer perspective can we resolve the food access challenges evident in these remote regions.

## 2. Food access and retail provision

### 2.1 Food access

Food access is defined as the ability of a person to obtain sufficient food for good health (McEntree 2009; Scottish Government 2009). It is determined by many interacting issues that include availability, affordability, culture and relevant skills. Environments with ‘inadequate’ access to affordable healthy foods have been labelled ‘food deserts’ but research on their existence is centred in urban communities and is inconclusive (see Beaulac et al, 2009; Bitto et al, 2003; Cummins et al, 2008, 2009, 2010; Lang and Caraher, 1998; Shaw, 2014; Whelan et al, 2002; White et al, 2004, 2007; Wrigley, 2002; Wrigley et al, 2003). While the food desert metaphor has widespread international traction (Caspi et al, 2012; Sadler et al, 2015), in that it has the potential to link food access to physical location, retail provision and health, for some the term ‘access is a more accurate and less misleading concept when it comes to highlighting food inequalities’ (McEntree, 2009 p350).

Physical availability and affordability of food remain key aspects of access and while research has shown that even if food availability appears reasonable, affordability can be more challenging, especially for ‘healthier’ items (Cummins and Macintyre, 1999; Dawson et al, 2008a; Nisbet, 2009; Smith et al, 2010; White et al., 2004). The presence of a supermarket together with other retail stores results in higher levels of consumer satisfaction than when only a supermarket is available (Clarke *et. al.*, 2012). McEntree (2009) explores this idea of choice and argues that this occurs on several levels including whether the consumer wants a healthy diet, has sufficient knowledge to make that decision, can afford healthy food and then can physically access healthy food. However, ‘an individual may be simultaneously satisfied with his (*sic*) ability to access food and his own health status, regardless of a nutrition expert’s opinion, who may arrive at a different conclusion’ (McEntree, 2009: 352). While access is a necessary condition for a healthy diet it may not be sufficient as this will depend on the types of store and the food stocked. This is particularly relevant in remote island communities, where retail assortment is often limited and supermarkets are sparse, or absent. Research has shown good availability of healthy carbohydrates and fruit but poor availability of protein rich foods, vegetables and dairy products with prices consistently higher for a select healthy basket of foods when compared to urban stores (Dawson *et. al.*, 2008a). Under such conditions ‘there is a great distinction between acceptance (*of retail provision*) or resignation on the one hand and approval on the other’ (Mackay and Laing, 1982: 123) as consumers in remote communities may feel they have limited governance in relation to food access.

Food access in remote communities can be understood in relation to ‘relative rurality’ (McEachern and Warnaby, 2006:198) indicated by the number of alternative shopping destinations accessible to a remote rural population within acceptable trade-offs. The main

dimensions of 'relative rurality' are rural characteristics (population density, rural infrastructure and distance from other retail centres) and retail provision (retail density (e.g. number and type of outlet, geographical concentration), retail infrastructure (e.g. supporting services and amenities), and distance from competitors (e.g. to access similar merchandise). Remote rural and island communities are restricted on all three retail provision dimensions. In respect of food access remote island communities represent an end position in the relative rurality continuum (Dowler, *et. al.*, 2011). Where retail provision is considered inadequate households can respond by altering shopping patterns to include a variety of outlets including those outside of the locality, possibly on the mainland, or accessing alternative food networks (Renting *et. al.*, 2012). Individuals may be resigned to the fact that food access is more limited and adjust menus and expenditure accordingly.

## 2.2 Small stores, poor provision and high prices

Small stores in rural areas are generally associated with poorer provision, more limited choice and higher prices (Byrom *et. al.*, 2001; McKie *et. al.*, 1998; Skerratt, 1999; White, 2004). Independent retailers, despite charging higher prices, often bring other benefits such as convenient location, flexible opening hours and a personalised service such as home delivery or extended credit (Baron *et. al.*, 2000; Clarke and Banga, 2010; Smith and Sparks, 2000). Small rural shops (Paddison and Calderwood, 2007), serve multiple functions, for example, operating as a post office or petrol station as well as local food store. As a result, the primary income for these stores may not be food sales and this puts less pressure on them to provide a wide range of food produce, including healthy items. Consequently, the choice of food available within these stores can be limited with implications for those with restricted mobility such as the elderly or families with young children who may be constrained to shopping locally. There is

evidence of diversity and new emergent forms in rural retailing (Paddison and Calderwood, 2007) with some small stores in remote rural areas providing a good range of healthy items (Dawson *et. al.*, 2008a,b). These conclusions are all relevant to an understanding of the supply side issues in remote island communities but do not really address the consumer issues of provisioning and food access. Focusing on retail provision provides an incomplete understanding of food shopping practices, for example in relation to healthy choices. A broader understanding of how consumers engage with and use food stores is required (Abrahams, 2007; McEntree, 2009). In addressing these consumption issues it is necessary to relate what people do in store to their domestic situation and to understand their experiences and practice of food shopping (Jackson *et. al.*, 2006; Rodriguez and Grahame, 2016) as a step to advocating public policy interventions.

### 2.3 The social practice of shopping

Food shopping can be regarded as part of a broader set of food provisioning practices located within in the market place that respond to changes in food production, manufacturing, processing and retailing (Cappellini *et. al.*, 2016). While food shopping may be seen as somewhat conventional the actual practice requires know how and collective understanding, explicit rules and teleoaffective structures that emanates in a series of ‘sayings and doings’ (Warde, 2016; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996). Arising from this, consumers know what to do, when and how (understandings), what they can and cannot do (rules) and the reasons why they do it (teleoaffective). What results is a series of performances that relates to the unique context or situation in which consumers find themselves (Shove and Pantzar, 2007). Food shopping as a social practise is subject to both spatial and social constraints with consumer choice between stores related to physical accessibility while choice within stores reflects value,

price and quality. Moreover, these practices are closely embedded in domestic routines and the complexities of daily life that make them resistant to change (Jackson *et. al.*, 2006). In remote locations, that distinction between intra and inter store choice is complicated by the physical distance between stores and the variations of in-store provision, itself a function of the remote location (Skerritt, 1999). The practice of shopping is not only constrained by the retail provision but accommodated within social and cultural constraints that reflect existing practice.

### 3. Aim and Methods

To study the consumer experience, and the relationship between the influences of local retail food provision, domestic context and food consumption in remote island communities, our research focused on the Western Isles of Scotland (Eilean Siar). This group of islands located off the north west coast of Scotland represent one extreme of relative rurality (McEachern and Warnaby, 2006). The research aimed to explore (1) what food access means for consumers living in a remote island community and (2) how the retail provision impacts on their lived experience of food shopping. Eilean Siar consists of a group of fifteen inhabited islands off the north west coast of Scotland, interviews were conducted on ten of the islands comprising Lewis, Harris, Great Bernera, in the north and North Uist, Berneray, Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, Barra and Vatersay in the south. The islands are accessible by ferry with main routes from Stornaway in Lewis to Ullapool (three hours), from Tarbert on Harris to Uig on Skye, connected to the mainland via a bridge (one and a half hours), or Lochboisdale on Uist to Oban (five hours) or Castlebay in Barra to Oban (six and a half hours). There are also flights from Stornaway, Benbecula and Barra to mainland Scottish airports. The population at the time of the research was 26,502 covering an area of 2999 sq km with a population density of 9 persons per sq. km.



Retail density has decreased substantially in these Western Isles (Anderson *et. al.*, 2007; Byrom *et. al.*, 2001; Dawson *et. al.*, 2008a,b).

At the time of the research there were sixty food stores on the Western Isles (Figure 1). Food stores<sup>i</sup> were divided into general food stores selling a range of food products; specialist food stores selling a narrower range of specialised food products; secondary food stores selling food in addition to other products. General food stores were further classified on floor space. A large supermarket (> 15000 sq. ft. selling area) was located in the north of the islands in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. There were four medium sized general stores (3000-15000 sq. ft. selling area), one of these was an independent store and the others were part of the Scottish consumer co-operative group. The retail landscape was dominated by thirty nine small general or specialist food stores (<3000 sq. ft. selling area) that included independent grocers and general stores together with sixteen specialist food retailers including butchers, bakers, fishmongers (Appendix 1). There were no hypermarkets, freezer stores or discounters on the islands and most areas were served by a general food store. This represents an average of one shop for 442 people and compares with 1 per 330 inhabitants in the Uists in 2000 (Byrom *et. al.*, 2001) and one for 163 people in the early 1980s (Mackay and Laing, 1982).

INSERT Figure 1: Retail Store Location and Population in Western Isles

This paper draws primarily on individual interviews (n=56), supplemented with data from individual food shopping diaries<sup>ii</sup> (n=41), to provide nuanced accounts of shopping practices and to access participants own 'lived' experiences (Jackson *et. al.*, 2006). Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants through advertising in the local newspaper, schools and community groups. Building on these initial contacts a snowballing technique was employed

through individual recommendation and introductions; a particularly useful approach for dispersed and small populations (Ritchie and Lewis, 2005). Initial recruitment of participants via phone, letters and e-mails yielded a small number of contacts and recruitment was slow in these relatively tight knit communities. In phase one of the project, snowballing generated 30 interviews recruited from the islands of Berneray, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, Barra, (South) in October 2006 and a further 26 interviews in phase 2 recruited from Harris and Lewis (North) in April 2007 (Appendix 2). This two phase data collection allowed us to look at food shopping across both Autumn and Spring periods to reflect seasonality and different delivery schedules. Semi structured interviews were employed and individuals asked about household food access including food shopping patterns, the choice and quality of produce in the stores used, food stockholding, meal planning and use of local produce. Semi-structured interviewing was used to explore individuals' perceptions of their shopping experiences and use of local retail provision, as a means of exploring relationships and as a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin the daily routines in this region (Jackson et al, 2006; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into QSR NVivo 7 FOR coding and analysis (Welsh, 2002).

Additional fieldwork was conducted in Harris and Lewis in the autumn of 2014 to establish changes since the main survey. This consisted of a review of the retail provision in the islands with additional store visits to visually assess provision and informal interviews with several small independent retailers. The original list of stores was validated and updated and price comparisons made in the two main supermarkets in Stornoway. Information on the availability of online shopping was accessed directly on retailer websites.

#### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Food retail perception and practices

Although in general, consumers throughout the Western Isles considered the choice of stores available to them acceptable, levels of satisfaction varied considerably depending on where they lived and specific aspects of provision. Low levels of satisfaction were related to prices, choice, quality and variability of food availability. Almost all accepted that living in a remote location brought with it specific challenges in obtaining food items. In order to obtain regular supplies of food interviewees used a variety of stores and ‘out-shopping’ to compensate for inadequate local provision. At the time of the initial research the only large general food store in the Western Isles (Scottish Co-operative) was located on the edge of Stornoway in the North of the Isle of Lewis. There was also a medium sized supermarket (Somerfield) in the town centre<sup>iii</sup>. Perceptions of the Co-operative supermarket were generally favourable. The strategy of one respondent, living in the northern isles, is typical with a split of grocery shopping between the two stores trading price against variety.

*I do half and half. Because I don't know if you've been to the Somerfield in Stornoway, but it's quite a small supermarket really and they don't have as big a variety as the Co-op do. (Female, aged 36-49, living with one child (13-15yrs), North)*

For this consumer the requirement was to visit both stores rather than choose between them. The majority of respondents living in the northern islands used the large general supermarket for their main shopping trip, despite the substantial journeys involved for some consumers. Smaller stores were used for top up shopping. While splitting shopping across several shops is usual it is the limited access to a large general supermarket that serves as a main challenge to many living on the islands. Travelling substantial distances to visit a food shop is part of the lived experience for many of the islanders and debates around food access in these remote communities raises questions about what constitutes ‘relative rurality’ (McEachern and

Warnaby, 2006). For example, driving from the south of Harris to Stornoway takes around one and a half hours by car and from Lochboisdale in South Uist involves a journey of about three and a half hours including a ferry trip<sup>iv</sup>. Consequently, these shopping trips need to be planned and organised around work and domestic activities. Yet this is accepted as part of living in this remote community. Debates around food access that utilise urban definitions of accessibility have little resonance with this remote community (McEntree and Argyeman, 2010).

Across the islands there was one medium sized general food store located in the North and three in the South. These medium size stores reportedly provided a good service with quality produce and good value in comparison to smaller general stores. Two of the three medium size food stores in the South, were located within a reasonable distance of each other (approx. 9km, 15-20 minutes, drive time) and participants reported using these stores in different ways. One store offered a broader range of products and stocked more 'exotic' fruit and vegetables compared to the other two. Whereas some respondents used this store with its bigger product range for all of their food shopping others only shopped here for more unusual items not available in other stores in the South. Such was the local reputation of this store that individuals were prepared to travel relatively long distances, often passing small food stores, to access the wider variety. Food presented a particular challenge due to the perishable nature hence the discussion centred around fresh foods and basic items which are purchased on a regular basis. Store management played a key role in this allegiance and poor management was cited as one reason why certain stores regularly ran out of basic items on a daily (bread) and weekly (potatoes) basis, creating additional challenges for both customers and staff of the store. Part of the choice about where to shop related to how well the store was run as well as where it was located echoing observations about the innovativeness of individual retail managers (Byrom and Medway, 2001; Paddison and Calderwood, 2007).

*...the manager at the [SCS] she's really good and if you ask for something they'll try and get it for you but obviously if they don't sell very much of it they'll not be able to keep it going on the shelves (Female, aged 50-65, living with husband (children left home), South)*

Small general stores provided a further option with several small co-operative stores in the South, one on Barra and the other in Sollas on North Uist. While individuals living in Sollas used this store for the majority of their shopping they could access other larger stores by car or by bus. In contrast, for those living on Barra, the largest of the three stores provided some of their needs but to access a supermarket residents had to travel by boat which was both time consuming and expensive. Individuals who were able to shop for food at larger stores outside of the locality expected less from the small stores and had a more positive perception of them. However, those who relied on these small stores felt that they were restricted in their 'choice' of products. The lack of variety, choice and poor quality produce available in some of the small stores was problematic. As one elderly incomer, with limited mobility, commented on the provision in her local shop.

*"I used to spend about £20 every week between dog food and bread and milk but... there's absolutely nothing in it, no vegetables they don't even keep potatoes and they don't deliver so life is very difficult..." (Female, aged 66+, living alone, North)*

Other than this small store the nearest alternative is a garage forecourt with a selection of food products, which is located 20 miles away (59 mins drive time, AA Route finder). For this elderly participant, who can no longer drive due to mobility problems, the garage would not be an option for shopping unless someone gave her a lift. Consumers without access to cars had to rely on public transport and faced the additional challenge of carrying their shopping

from the bus stop. Most of our older interviewees without cars relied on social networks of family and friends for transport and could get lifts or share transport with other family members. Proximity to supermarkets was an issue for those living in the southern islands given the distances and the time required to travel to the supermarkets in Stornoway, although many were simply resigned to this (Mackay and Laing, 1982).

Small independent stores were regarded as an essential part of the community. These small stores were probably closest to the idea of the 'traditional village store' (Scarpello *et. al.*, 2009; Smith and Sparks, 2000). A number were multi-functional, providing essential services such as post office facilities and selling fuel but individuals still wanted them to stock a good range of food products.

*“...they're called the butchers but they actually are the paper shop and they sell petrol and general groceries they're not licensed but they sell everything else and there is a meat counter there as well....” (Female, aged 50-65, living with three children (10-15yrs), South)*

Individuals were concerned that small remote post offices may be closed in the future and feared that the food stores attached to them may be forced to close. For some this could mean an additional thirty minutes' drive time to the nearest store. Most of the islanders in this research wanted to support these small independent stores and felt it important to use them to ensure the stores remained open and continued an important service to the community. One participant tried to support her local independent store by purchasing basic products such as meat and milk on a regular basis but acknowledged the additional costs of her allegiance.

*But we support the local shops during the week. We feel we've got to, and they can't compete with supermarkets. It's as simple as that. But when you've buying bulk like us, it would cost us a fortune to be buying everything from the local shops, (Female, aged 66+, living with husband and one child (26-35 yrs), North)*

Despite local allegiance, the diary data revealed that over half of all shopping trips recorded were to a supermarket or medium sized general store. One fifth of shopping trips were allocated to the main shopping with sixty percent designated as top up shopping. In areas where there are only small stores islanders often used several stores in combination, depending on store proximity, to purchase the food they require with each store filling some gap in provision. Such multi-shop visiting strategy usually involved travelling a considerable time and distance and was impossible without personal transport.

There are three community owned shops in the Western Isles one in the North in Uig on Lewis, the other in the South on Eriskay and a one at Leverburgh in Harris. These shops are generally regarded as providing a vital service to the local community.

*A community shop like they have in Uig. I think it's fabulous. I know I can go down there in, what, 40 minutes or something and shop down there and get anything – lemons, limes, aubergines, you know, really unusual things. Here you're getting the very basics – tea, sugar, milk, lots of tins, lots of pot noodles. (Female, aged 50-65, living with husband, North)*

This community shop on Uig, had a good range of dry and canned products, frozen products, fresh fruit and vegetables with a chilled meat section to the back of the store and a small café area. The store stocked 'locally' sourced products including meat. The location is very remote and the store plays a vital and essential role. There was a strong sense of community in these

stores and many respondents wanted to be part of this by supporting the store, as a retail operation and as a local employer. For some participants this familiarity and often-friendly atmosphere in store adds to the sense of community and is part of the shopping experience and island life. As such, this community support was integral to consumer choices. The service in store was reported as friendly and helpful, with the store manager sourcing items when requested by consumers. It is this personal service and effort on the part of management that added to the positive perception and the sense of community. The community shop provides an opportunity for face to face interaction and building trust, social capital between customers and the retailer (Chiffolleau, 2009; Goodman, 2003; Holloway *et. al.*, 2007; Winter, 2003). The strategies and decisions on where to shop come down to what is available locally and accessible more widely.

#### 4.2 Adapting to the food retail environment

For many islanders the decision about where to shop for food was a trade-off between opting for a store that was within a few miles of where they lived or worked or one that offered a wider range of products and service but required a substantial planned journey. This was not simply about convenience and physical location, it was also about fitting food shopping around work and family activities; just over a quarter of shopping trips were linked to the working day. One young woman, who held several jobs, had limited time between shifts and was unable to travel the 40 miles round trip after work to an alternative store. As a result, she often had limited choice in her local store a medium sized general store



*“Just that there’s hardly ever anything there, you go in and they haven’t got this and they haven’t got that. They’ve got a lot of fresh chicken, fine if you want chicken every day but other things ... many’s a day you can’t get bread.”*

*(Female, aged 16-25, cohabiting with partner and one child, South)*

Given the travel<sup>v</sup> costs and time these shopping trips often had to be carefully planned and coordinated with other activities, such as work or child care. Often food shopping was combined with other shopping activities, for example, banking. One of the buses took a circular route, stopping twice and waiting while passengers shop before carrying on the journey, as one interviewee explains.

*“Aw I hardly, I hardly, I only go up there if I have business to do up there if I’ve got a few other things to do at Benbecula... it’s always the light stuff I buy not the heavy, I don’t buy tins and I don’t buy... cos there’s nothing I dislike more than trying to carry bags on buses and things so ...” (Female, aged 50-65, living with brother, South)*

Food shopping requires more than simply having transport networks available as the large distances between stores mean sufficient periods of time must be allocated for the shopping activity. Physical difficulties of carrying shopping bags can restrict the quantity and type of products purchased which can influence the store choices of participants and therefore the produce available to them. Stores may be selected for ease of access rather than being the preferred store choice.

Food shopping routines, for many of the interviewees, were organised around store delivery schedules and this required local knowledge about delivery times. Late deliveries, cancelled

sailings, or an influx of tourists interrupted shopping routines. While most stores had daily deliveries in the Northern Western Isles (Lewis, Great Bernera and Harris) deliveries in the south were less frequent usually three times a week on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday in the summer moving to Monday, Wednesday and Friday in the winter. Those who were able to organise food shopping trips around the delivery schedules had a better choice of product within the store. While frequent shopping trips, two or three times a week, were seen as inconvenient by some, for others they were a part of island life and a coping response to the variable store delivery schedules. Those who relied on public transport found their choice of products was much more limited when they got to the store.

In the southern isles a local voluntary organisation, 'Tagsa Uist' runs a 'shopping bus' which provides transport for those who are unable to use or access public transport, due to a physical disability, medical condition or a mental health problem. This shopping bus service took participants to the store on a weekly basis. One elderly participant felt the shopping bus provided a good service but the schedule did not always coincide with the store delivery arriving too early, or sometimes too late to stock up on basics such as bread and milk.

Consumers who did not have access to a car often relied on a network of family and friends with cars to take them food shopping. The sense of community was apparent in this activity and included everything from organising lifts to the store to actually doing the shopping for others. Another response to the potential supply problem was to buy extra food and stockpile when it was available. While this can exacerbate availability issues for others it was generally accepted and seen as one way of overcoming the problem of ensuring an adequate home inventory although it required sufficient income to buy the additional quantities and sufficient storage facilities. The availability of domestic freezers was a key determinant in relation to bulk purchasing particularly where frozen food was bought or fresh food was frozen for later. One

family had several freezers in an out-building to stock both fresh and frozen food; this allowed them to make several large shopping trips during the year. Frozen food was not really an option for those who used public transport due to the travel times and distances involved

*“Frozen vegetables eh ... not much of them the reason, I would buy more, but it's getting them from town back here, time you know if they start defrosting .....if I've got the car and I know I'm going straight in and straight back yes I can buy some but it's mostly fresh fruit and veg I have, I hardly ever, I hardly ever have frozen” (Female, aged 36-49, living with two children (10-15 yrs), North)*

Quality and freshness of produce were often stated as important considerations about where to shop for fresh food and perishability was a limiting factor. Buying local fish and meat produce, directly off the boat or farm, was regarded as the best way to achieve optimum freshness, quality and taste. Quality and freshness of fruit and vegetables was a deciding factor for some in choosing where to carry out their main shop. The poor quality in some stores was attributed to receiving lower quality produce and the time spent in transit to the store. But local stores were not the only means of accessing food.

#### 4.3 Alternatives to buying food in local stores

Alternatives to buying food in the island stores arise in part from necessity due to inconsistent and unreliable supplies and in part as a response to high prices. While a strategy of out-shopping involves travelling to stores on other parts of the island it also includes travelling to mainland stores. These mainland shopping excursions were usually linked to holidays or working trips and involved considerable financial outlay, some households were spending between £300 and £900 in a single trip. This was seen as a way of reducing the long-term cost

and providing access to a better range and quality of produce but these were relatively infrequent trips.

Islanders also used a range of alternative food networks<sup>vi</sup> outside the retail network that included using local produce sales, buying direct from producers, producing/ growing their own food, bartering, sharing/ gifting food, hunting/ gathering and fishing locally. Access to these alternative networks varied between islands, communities and households depending on personal knowledge and contacts, location, land to utilise for food production, and negotiation skills. Alternative food networks were used in conjunction with conventional food retail supply and could be more accurately termed complementary food networks. The extent to which these networks are used often depended on the local retail provision and the season. Moreover, these island communities are well served with regional and speciality food production relative to their population size, and as areas with a high incidence of crofting exhibit less ‘delocalisation’ compared to less remote areas (Watts *et. al.*, 2005, 2011). In Castlebay on Barra, for example, where the choice of stores and produce within local stores was limited, several participants went directly to local suppliers to access fresh produce. These networks were regarded as more of a necessity than a genuine choice and avoided having to travel further afield reflecting the integral nature of the alternative food networks in regard to relative rurality and retail access. Other studies have found alternative food networks were chosen over of other options, such as a supermarket, as an ethical or lifestyle choice (Weatherell *et. al.*, 2003).

Many of those who had suitable land available and were physically capable grew vegetables to ensure the household had access to good quality vegetables. Alternatively, allotments or community growing projects, where members of the community join together to produce fruit, vegetables and herbs, offered another solution. Excess produce could then be shared amongst

volunteers or sold through local markets or stores. Food accessed through these alternative food networks was considered, by some, to be better quality, as one respondent explained.

*“the taste is so much better and you feel that the taste is right then you have all the better vitamins and minerals in it as well you know.....same with home grown potatoes completely different to what you buy in the shops.....em, I mean pride in sitting down to a meal knowing everything has been locally produced [by self] (Male, aged 50-65, living with wife, South)*

While out-shopping and alternative food networks offer a solution to limited choice, the two large supermarkets<sup>vii</sup> located in Stornoway offer a home delivery service<sup>viii</sup>. Interviews with some local retailers on Lewis suggest that this delivery service is attractive to younger customers. We suggest that online solutions and e-commerce will have a limited impact on food shopping in remote communities not least because of poor access to fast internet networks. As Freahy and Calderwood (2016) note internet availability is of limited value in the purchase of perishable grocery items with national grocery chains almost exclusively located in the main Scottish island towns and offering limited or no online service.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

*‘...Abstract arguments about consumer choice must, we argue, be grounded in a detailed understanding of consumers' lived experience at the local level.’ (Jackson et. al., 2006; 63).*

Lived experiences of food shopping in these remote islands support previous suggestions of considerable disparities in retail provision and constrained choices (Furey et. al., 2001; McKie

*et. al.*, 1998). Living in such a remote island location most participants expected to travel longer distances, than those on the mainland, to access food stores. Expectations of the choice available in store were also less than would be expected from the larger stores on the mainland. These compromises in terms of store accessibility and choice in store were, for many, regarded as a trade-off for living in an area with beautiful scenery and safe communities. Generally, consumers throughout the Western Isles were satisfied with the number of stores available to them, although satisfaction within the stores sometimes varied, in terms of product selection, product quality and service (Dawson *et. al.*, 2008a; Mackay and Laing, 1982). However, both the pattern of provision and coping strategies are complex with the 'retail space' not confined to the immediate locale or even retail provision on the islands but determined by a set of consumer practices that have developed in response to the retail environment in which inter store competition is weak. To a considerable extent consumer practices and product assortment are determined by the retailer, rather than the retailer responding to the consumer as would occur in environments with greater store choice.

Whereas rural consumers use independent stores for incidental and emergency purchases, or specific items, or top up shopping (Broadbridge and Calderwood, 2002; Smith and Sparks, 2000) for consumers living in remote island communities this, of necessity, may be where their main shopping occurs (Clarke and Banga, 2010; Rodriguez and Grahame, 2016). While shopping locally (a relative concept that may mean several kilometres from home) is convenient, choice is often limited and prices are high. Yet those living in the Western Isles accept this as part of everyday life in a remote community. Unlike more accessible rural communities, they often do not have the opportunity to 'walk away' when dissatisfied with the local provision (Findlay and Sparks, 2008; McEachern and Warnaby, 2006). But equally the regular face to face interactions, between customer and retailer, means that customers can

influence, to some extent, what is available in store and build closer relationships with the local store. The downside is that there may be little in the way of privacy. Individual accounts reveal the extent to which this connection to the local shop is socially embedded, to the point of an obligation to support the local shop as part of a civic responsibility.

Small retailers continue to play a role in terms of the local community. A number of participants saw the local store as more than simply somewhere to buy food electing choosing to support their local store and the local economy, in order to maintain these facilities and services. In several cases the community has rallied together and used private resources along with public money to establish community food stores. In many ways these best capture the community spirit that underpins civic food networks (CFN's) (Renting, 2012) and allegiance to the small community store offers islanders a stake in the business. The establishment of community food stores are a direct response of islanders to issues of food governance and limited access to established grocery stores, although they bring their own challenges in relation to managing and running the stores.

The food retail landscape in these remote communities encompasses a much broader geographical area beyond the immediate locale and including the mainland. As an alternative to the local shop out-shopping offers more choice and variety of food and lower prices but therein lies a dilemma. While a number of islanders welcome the opportunity to shop at a larger well stocked supermarket they know that this would put greater pressure on the smaller stores that have served the community well. They are very aware that not supporting the local store might have longer term consequences of local shop closure for the whole community. While this can create a conflict between individual choice and community well-being many try to get a balance between patronising both their local stores and shopping further afield.

In remote areas food access is the result of a complex nexus of social, economic, and physical constraints on choice - a nexus created by individuals and understood in very different ways. As this research has shown islanders, and retailers, have to be adaptive and food shopping practices have evolved to address specific challenges of adequate food access. That, of itself, should not result in any complacency, as there remain challenges in ensuring that remote communities and particularly disadvantaged consumers have more than a minimally adequate selection of food and can exercise some choice in what they eat. Across the islands the key is ensuring that there is a mix of food retail formats including small independent stores, community stores, general food stores and supermarkets that serve the needs of these island communities both in terms of offering choices between and, perhaps, more importantly within those stores. There is a public policy need to ensure that these communities are not ignored by large retailers and at the same time ensure that small stores can remain viable. From a consumer perspective access to supermarkets improves choice, while availability of small stores benefits less mobile members of the community.

In a broader debate about alternative food networks it is perhaps ironic that in these remote communities the 'supermarket' is the alternative food network and access to a large general store is seen as one of the solutions to accessing affordable healthier food. Those living on the Western Isles have limited access to supermarkets and see this retail format as offering greater choice through a wider selection of products and better prices. Given the choice many would prefer to shop in the supermarket but for many consumers supermarkets remain the alternative to other traditional forms of grocery retail (see Abrahams, 2009 for a comparison with developing regions). Direct producer sales, farmers' markets, grow your own and other alternative food networks are seen as complementing rather than competing with retail stores



for fresh produce. Moreover, the use of alternative food networks and small stores is a pragmatic, rather than a romantic, response to the situation many consumers find themselves in. Given the crofting tradition (Watts *et. al.*, 2011) obtaining local products directly from source is an established practice that does not necessarily regard this as an alternative food network. Taken together this raises questions about the utility of alternative food network as an organising concept when seen from the consumer perspective in a region lacking the diversity in grocery retail afforded in many urban and even rural communities (Tregear, 2011; Holloway *et. al.*, 2007; Watts *et. al.*, 2005, 2011).

This research has begun to unpack some of the complex relationships between island communities and food supplies but in order to meet public food policy objectives that promise ‘access to affordable, safe, healthy and fresh seasonal produce’ (Scottish Government, 2008:3). We need a better understanding of the specific food access issues that face these remote communities as opposed to those living in urban environments (Scottish Government, 2014). Part of the challenge in moving this agenda forward lies in understanding the specific local and regional nature of access and what this means for remote communities. There are questions around how we define access that resides, in part, on the existing retail provision and, in part, on how consumers respond through their everyday food practices and competing demands on their time. Small stores remain an important part of food access, embedded in local communities they exist beside more traditional forms of procurement and compete with larger supermarkets by adapting to the needs of their customers, for example, providing home delivery services, or in linking up with postal or public transport services, to improve access for their customers. While online retailing has the potential to improve access in remote communities, the uptake has been slow in the food and grocery sector (Freahey and Paddison, 2014). More work on the barriers to developing these ‘alternatives’, including network coverage, costs, and consumers’

willingness to engage with these new forms of grocery retailing is required. Nevertheless, these remote communities are resilient, adapting their food shopping practices and accommodating whatever changes they encounter.

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<sup>i</sup> General food stores type includes supermarkets, grocers, hypermarkets, convenience stores, freezer centres and discounters. The specialist type includes butchers, bakers, fishmongers, greengrocers, market stalls and delicatessens. Non-food stores include newsagents, confectioners and off-licences.

<sup>ii</sup> 20 diaries were completed in the North and 21 in the South. Each participant recorded all food shopping occasions (not actual food purchased) over a 7-day period. This generated a total of 194 shopping occasions, 87 of these in the Northern Western Isles (North) and 107 in the Southern Western Isles (South). The mean number of shopping occasions per participant was 4.73.

<sup>iii</sup> At the time of the study this was a Somerfield supermarket. The store was sold to Tesco. <http://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/news/local-headlines/tesco-plans-1-118465> (accessed 31 March, 2016).

<sup>iv</sup> The introduction of causeways to the islands has increased store choice and removed the time constraints for those reliant on ferry links between islands. Participants report causeways have also improved the delivery of produce to some of the stores and may be a contributory factor in improved food provision in stores such as the community co-op on Eriskay.

<sup>v</sup> Just over half of the population in the Western Isles had to travel in excess of 10km and 22% in excess of 25km to reach a medium or large size store (Dawson *et. al.* 2008).

<sup>vi</sup> There were some interesting examples of innovative retailing. On the Isle of Harris the Croft36 shop <http://www.croft36.com/> sells fresh shellfish, seasonal vegetables, free range eggs, pasties, pies and bread with an honesty box for payment; local stores offering home delivery for regular shoppers, for example the Shawbost delivery service <http://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/shawbost-village-shoptaking-on-the-big-boys>; and community stores providing café and restaurant facilities to add to the shopping 'experience' <http://uigcommunityshop.co.uk/> (all accessed 21 November 2016).



vii The two large multiples in Stornoway continue to compete on price. Store visits at the end of 2014 found Tesco had lower prices on 21 out of the 35 healthy food items, compared to the Co-op with lower prices on 5 items, and comparable prices on the remaining items (Anderson *et. al.* 2007).

viii On 21<sup>st</sup> January 2014 Tesco began an online grocery delivery although this appeared to be under some pressure due to high levels of demand (Stornoway Gazette 2014) See <http://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/news/local-headlines/rural-shop-in-appeal-to-buy-delivery-van-1-3881911> (accessed 17 November, 2016)

#### Appendix A: Food stores across the Western Isles

ISLAND	STORE	STORE TYPE	STORE CATEGORY
BARRA N=4	S	Fishmonger	Specialist (mobile)
	SG	Small General, Grocer, Butcher	Independent (2), Co-op
BENBECULA N=4	S	Butcher	Specialist
	SG	Small General (Supermarket), Medium General	Independent, Spar
	MG	Medium General (Supermarket)	Co-op
HARRIS N=8	S	Butcher	Specialist (mobile)
	SG	Convenience (3), Small General (Grocer), General store, Grocer (2)	Independent (5), Independent (mobile), Independent (community)
NORTH UIST N=6	S	Fishmonger	Specialist
	SG	Grocer (2), Convenience, General store, Small General	Independent (4), Co-op
SOUTH UIST N=5	S	Butcher	Specialist
	SG	General store (2), Medium General (Grocer), Medium General (supermarket)	Independent (3), Co-op
LEWIS N=33	S	Fishmonger (4), Butcher (4), Baker (2), Health Food	Specialist (9), Specialist (mobile), Independent
	SG	Convenience (12), Grocer (7), General store	Independent (8), Independent (PO) (5), Independent (PFS) (5), Independent (community/PFS), Co-op
	MG	Medium General (Supermarket)	Somerfield
	LG	Large General (Supermarket)	Co-op

Key: S=Specialist, SG = Small general, MG = Medium general, LG = Large general. PO = Post Office, PFS = Petrol Filling Station.

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Appendix B: Profile of respondents

	Number of Participants	Percentage
<b>Household size</b>		
1	13	23
2	21	38
3	10	18
4 or more	12	21
<b>Age</b>		
16-35	10	18
36-49	18	32
50-65	15	27
Over 66	13	23
<b>Household composition</b>		
1 adult	14	25
2 adults	18	32
3 or more adults	4	7
Single parent	4	7
2 or more adults + children	16	29
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	8	14
Single with children	1	2
Married/co-habiting	14	25
Married/co-habiting with children	19	34
Widowed/divorced/separated	11	20
Widowed/divorced/separated with children	3	5
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Northern Western Isles	26	46
Southern Western Isles	30	54

